

Cedille Records
5255 N. Lakewood Ave.
Chicago, IL 60640-2220
(773) 989-2515
(773) 989-2517 fax
www.cedillerecords.org

Press contact: Nat Silverman
Nathan J. Silverman Co./PR
1830 Sherman Ave., Suite 401
Evanston, IL 60201-3773
Phone (847) 328-4292
Fax (847) 328-4317
Email: natsilv@aol.com

News

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COLORFUL CONTEMPORARY WORKS CULMINATE CD SERIES FEATURING BLACK COMPOSERS

African Heritage Symphonic Series, Vol. III Presents Program of World Premieres

World premieres of colorful, contemporary works by four prominent African-American composers are heard on Cedille Records' new *African Heritage Symphonic Series, Vol. III* (Cedille Records CDR 90000 066), the final installment in the first major survey of music by Black composers since a landmark CBS series in the 1970s.

Paul Freeman, artistic director and featured conductor for the long out-of-print CBS Black Composers series, conducts the Chicago Sinfonietta for Cedille's *African Heritage Symphonic Series*. Dominique-René de Lerma, chief consultant and program annotator for the CBS series, has written Cedille's program notes.

The new disc, with compositions postdating those on the CBS recordings, showcases music by Michael Abels (b. 1962), David Baker (b. 1931), William Banfield (b. 1961), and Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson (b. 1932). The Sara Lee Foundation is exclusive corporate sponsor of the recording, which was also made possible by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and The Aaron Copland Fund for Music.

World music meets classical in Abels' inventive *Global Warming* (1990), written shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It celebrates the common threads of diverse folk music traditions, culminating in an intriguing "scene" where Middle Eastern music morphs seamlessly into an Irish

melody. *Global Warming* has enjoyed more than 100 performances and was the first piece by a Black composer to enter the repertory of the National Symphony of South Africa.

Born in Phoenix, Ariz., Abels graduated with a composition degree from the University of California and studied African music at the California Institute for the Arts. He lives in Los Angeles, where, he says, “I’ve been able to learn about music from around the world simply by opening the window.”

Baker, an Indianapolis native and music professor at Indiana University, began his career as a jazz musician and trombonist, performing and recording with Quincy Jones, Maynard Ferguson, and Lionel Hampton. He later became enamored of the cello and studied the instrument with Janos Starker at Indiana. His Cello Concerto (1975), dedicated to Starker, opens with moments both edgy and lyrical, leading to a moving, impressionistic, and sometimes otherworldly slow movement with an extended solo cello recitative and exotic percussion. Jazz influences spark the final movement, where interplay between strings and percussion has an improvisational feel, as do the spunky, pizzicato cello lines. Baker even manages to work in an attractive twelve-tone row conceived by Starker. Cello soloist Katinka Kleijn, a young stand-out in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, makes her Cedille Records debut.

Born in Detroit and now based in St. Paul, Minn., Banfield was a recent W.E.B. Dubois fellow at Harvard, where he completed two operas. In 2002, Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison invited Banfield to Princeton University as a visiting artist. He calls his *Essay for Orchestra* (1994) “an attempt to hear the various orchestral voices interacting.” It’s been described as “a large 19th-century Romanticism infused with contemporary jazz harmonic and rhythmic sensibilities.” The *International Dictionary of Black Composers* notes Banfield’s belief that “the juxtaposition of the many styles that comprise the popular music scene today has prepared younger audiences for similar developments in art music.”

Perkinson is a product of New York City’s High School of Music and Art, where he met Igor Stravinsky and first began composing and conducting. He went on to earn a master’s degree in

composition at the Manhattan School of Music and studied conducting in Europe with expatriate Dean Dixon and at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria. In 1965, he co-founded New York's Symphony of the New World and later became its music director. He was music director for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, for which he penned *For Bird, With Love*, a ballet tribute to jazzman Charlie Parker.

The newest work on the CD, Perkinson's *Generations: Sinfonietta No. 2 for Strings* (1996), was written with the composer's family in mind. The first movement, "Misterioso and Allegro (to my daughter)," quotes the American folk tune "Mockingbird." A stately slow movement in the form of a saraband is "dedicated to the matriarchs of my immediate family." The playful "Alla Burletta (to my grandson)" is based on the tune "Li'l Brown Jug." The final movement, dedicated to family patriarchs, encompasses an original melody, a theme of African origin, and another take on "Mockingbird."

The first volume of Cedille's *African Heritage Symphonic Series* (Cedille CDR 90000 055), released in November 2000, includes Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's "Danse Nègre" from *African Suite* (1898) and *Petite Suite de Concert* (1910); Fela Sowande's *African Suite* (selections) from 1930; and William Grant Still's Symphony No. 1, "Afro-American" (1930).

The second volume (Cedille CDR 90000 061), released in December 2001, includes Ulysses Kay's *Overture to Theater Set* (1968); George Walker's *Lyric for Strings* (1941); Roque Cordero's *Eight Miniatures for Small Orchestra* (1948); Hale Smith's *Ritual and Incantations* (1974); and Adolphus Hailstork's *An American Port of Call* (1985) and *Epitaph: For a Man Who Dreamed* (1979).

"The *African Heritage Symphonic Series* aims to call attention to the contributions of Black composers, while bringing listeners a wealth of new sounds spanning a century of musical creativity," James Ginsburg, label founder and producer, says. "Our goal was to produce a worthy, twenty-first century successor to maestro Freeman's previous series."

On that CBS project (nine LPs released between 1974 and 1978), Freeman conducted various American and European orchestras; the new series is performed entirely by the Chicago Sinfonietta, a mid-sized professional orchestra Freeman founded in 1987. The ensemble has a reputation for inventive programming, weaving contributions of ethnic composers and soloists into programs of classical, romantic, and contemporary repertoire.

Freeman, an African-American, has conducted more than 100 orchestras and made more than 200 recordings. He received his Ph.D. from the Eastman School of Music and studied with conductor Pierre Monteux. His awards include a top prize in the Mitropoulos International Conducting Competition and a Fulbright grant to study at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin. Dr. Freeman is currently music director of both the Chicago Sinfonietta and the Czech National Symphony Orchestra in Prague.

Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE), dedicated to showcasing Chicago's most noteworthy classical artists, is an arm of the nonprofit Chicago Classical Recording Foundation.

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AFRICAN HERITAGE SYMPHONIC SERIES, VOL. III
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 066)

Michael Abels: *Global Warming* (1990) (8:18)
David Baker: *Cello Concerto** (1975) (19:56)
William Banfield: *Essay for Orchestra* (1994) (10:38)
Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson: *Generations: Sinfonietta No. 2 for Strings* (1996) (19:31)

Chicago Sinfonietta
Paul Freeman, conductor
*Katinka Kleijn, cello soloist